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U.N. Aide Sees Little to Curb Spread of Atom Arms

By JUDITH MILLER
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VIENNA, Feb. 11 — The new Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency thinks that several countries could soon acquire nuclear weapons but that there is little more his agency can do to stop them than it is already doing.

Asserting that the international effort to curb the spread of atomic weapons was at a "critical juncture," the new director, Hans Blix, said the agency had repeatedly expressed concern about the nuclear activities and aspirations of four nations in particular, India, Pakistan, South Africa and Israel.

"The alarm bells are now ringing loud and clear with respect to these four," he said.

In an interview, Mr. Blix, a former Swedish Foreign Minister who became director of the 110-member agency in December, defended it against a recent spate of criticism but gave a candid and sober assessment of the limited role it could play in dissuading nations from acquiring atomic weapons.

Limit to Agency's Mandate

In outlining what he terms the agency's limited and "technical" mandate, Mr. Blix appeared to call into question the Reagan Administration's policy of assigning major responsibility for stopping nuclear arms proliferation to the agency, a United Nations organization that both promotes nuclear power and monitors nuclear fuel and facilities to assure that they are not being used for military purposes. The Administration is relying heavily on agency inspections to allay concerns about its policy of promoting American nuclear exports to developing countries.

At the same time, however, Mr. Blix strongly endorsed a major element of President Reagan's policy against the spread of nuclear weapons, which focuses American diplomatic initiatives on mitigating security concerns that could lead countries to acquire a nuclear capability.

"You can't stop proliferation by safeguards," Mr. Blix maintained. "Security considerations are decisive. If a country feels secure it is more likely to invite us in. Insecure countries are more likely to seek atomic weapons."

Mr. Blix specifically praised President Reagan's program to bolster Pakistan's security by providing President Mohammad Zia ul-Haq with a six-year, $3.2-billion military and economic aid program and selling 40 F-16 fighter planes on an accelerated schedule.

"It is intelligent to try to build confidence in the security situation of such a state," Mr. Blix responded when asked about the program.

Nevertheless, Mr. Blix, 54 years old, disclosed that the agency had made "no progress" in its six-month effort to persuade Pakistan to permit installation of additional cameras and measuring devices to improve safeguards at a 135-megawatt nuclear reactor near Karachi.

The agency made its request after it detected what it called anomalies and irregularities at the reactor, which can produce plutonium for atomic weapons.

There is no evidence, Mr. Blix said, that Pakistan has been diverting fuel from its civilian reactor to nonpeaceful purposes. But he said the agency's Board of Governors had received two reports saying that monitoring arrangements were no longer adequate and that the agency could no longer provide reliable assurances that nuclear material was not being diverted.

Scapegoat Role Is a Worry

Agency officials said privately that Mr. Blix was preparing to submit a third, similar report to the 34-member board on Feb. 23, when the governing body meets for the first time since Mr. Blix became Director General.

He expressed concern that the agency could become a scapegoat should another country detonate a nuclear explosive. He underscored the "clear limitations" of the agency's responsibilities. The agency has no authority, for example, to inspect or search for undeclared nuclear facilities in member states, he said. The agency cannot force members to sign the Nonproliferation Treaty of 1970, under which 115 nations have pledged not to develop nuclear weapons and to open all of their civilian nuclear installations to agency inspection.

Mr. Blix said the agency was "an alarm system, not a police organization," and could only draw attention to countries that were signaling their intention to develop atomic weapons. According to Mr. Blix, India, Pakistan, South Africa and Israel were of the most immediate concern. None of the four, he noted, was willing to sign the Nonproliferation Treaty. India detonated an atomic device in 1974 and all four countries either have or are building facilities that they refuse to submit to agency inspection. They are resisting what Mr. Blix termed some "reasonable demands" by the agency to permit its declarations about the countries activities to be credible.

Concern About Other Nations

American intelligence officials have asserted for several years that Israel has developed a nuclear weapons capability. Mr. Blix said, "Israel has not exploded a nuclear device, and we hope that it will not."

In the interview, Mr. Blix said there was also concern in the agency about Argentina, Brazil, and Spain because they have not signed the treaty either. He said, however, that he thought "all of the facilities in these countries are under inspection."

Mr. Blix criticized the Carter Administration's policies, which he said emphasized "sticks rather than carrots" to dissuade countries from developing atomic bombs. The policy of denying developing nations access to nuclear supplies, Mr. Blix continued, had the "unintended but undesirable consequence" of encouraging nations such as Argentina, South Korea, Mexico and Brazil to pursue acquisition of independent reprocessing and enrichment technologies that would increase their ability to make nuclear devices should they decide to do so.

Mr. Blix has taken charge of the agency just as questions are being raised about its political and technical competence. Critics charge that the agency's safeguards are inadequate and that it is increasingly the scene of political confrontations between developing and developed nations that threaten to undermine the safeguard system. Mr. Blix dismissed these criticisms and stressed that criticism of the agency stemmed in large part from a misunderstanding of its roles and functions.

He predicted, however, that the next 10 to 20 years would be a critical period for efforts to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. He warned that there would be either what he called a "dynamic evolution" of international acceptance of safeguards or "an acceleration of patterns of insecurity" that would lead to a rush to develop nuclear weapons.